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The unionization of teachers has had consequences beyond traditional trade union objectives and now encompasses educational and sociopolitical goals. The American Federation of Teachers and the United Federation of Teachers of New York have used their organized power to influence school administration policies, to better the educational environment through improved teaching conditions, and to develop programs which attempt to arrest the deteriorating educational situation in urban schools. Organized teachers have also been involved as a pressure group in antipoverty efforts and the civil rights movement. (NH)

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THE URBAN SCHOOL CRISIS

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An Anthology of Essays

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with an Introduction by
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TEACHERS AND THE URBAN SCHOOL CRISIS

by Maurice R. Berube

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It would seem that teachers are fated to be objects of indifference. The traditional neglect characteristic of paternalistic school boards often permeates the liberal community when there is talk of meeting the current educational crisis in our big cities. Scant attention is paid teachers as a force making for change, whether for good or ill. Yet the plain fact is that teachers have succeeded in redistributing the balance of educational power in the large cities—as a result of organizing into teacher unions—so that collectively they have become the single most important new element to be reckoned with in urban school systems.

This myopia may be due partly to the view that the drift towards teacher unionization in New York, Detroit, Boston, Philadelphia and Chicago is *solely* a symptom of the current educational malaise in city schools. Furthermore, this view is reinforced by the equally strong tendency to interpret teacher unionization not from an educational standpoint but as a goad to the growth of unions in the twilight of labor's organizing drives. "This surge to unionism, without outside urging, comes when labor must reach out among the white collar workers or slide into decline," was the sentiment voiced by a liberal commentator when New York City teachers joined the UFT. "Here is a key to white collar public opinion." The impact of teacher unionism so far, it would seem, has been for the rest of organized labor to learn the lesson of organizing professionals—and learn it well—or prepare to face a dismal future as automation and cybernation take their toll.

The result of concentrating on teacher unionization as symptom and emphasizing its "laborizing" value has been to blur those aspects of unionization which may in the long run prove to be more important. For a teacher's union is comprised of three distinct elements, only one of which relates to conventional trade unionism; the other two are enmeshed in the educational and socio-political spheres.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to comprehend this neglect of the emergent power of teachers except in terms of a lag in attitudes. That the UFT deter-

mines through collective bargaining more than three fourths of what will be spent on education in the city schools, and in large measure where it will be spent, surely attests to a new balance of educational power. This role in spending policy—resulting from labor bargaining—is hemmed in neither by narrow economic self-interest (although this must always be a major concern) nor by accepted procedures of labor negotiations, "We would place no limit on the scope of negotiations," AFT President Charles Cogen has declared. "In fact, anything having to do with the operation of the school is a matter of professional concern and should thus be subject to collective bargaining."

This open-ended power of negotiations transcends the economic, and gets close to the marrow of educational decision-making. For the first time in our history, teachers through their collective might are little by little going into partnership with the professional managerial class of administrators in running the schools. The extent (and perhaps hint as to the future) of this trend may be gathered from a contract recently negotiated in the integrated suburban Detroit community of Inskster, Michigan. Here the AFT local obtained a contract stating that the Board of Education and the teacher union "mutually recognize that the most significant social movement occuring in America today is the civil rights revolution" and that "effective education must be integrated education." This was no mere rhetorical concession to the times: the Inkster contract specifically called for the purchase of "integrated elementary textbooks to be used as the basic reading texts" when few school systems used anything but Dick and Jane readers, and that the Inkster faculty be "fully integrated by the earliest possible date." The union and the board also agreed to establish a coalition committee in conjunction with civil rights groups and church leaders to serve as a vehicle to "eliminate de facto segregation."

This ability to cross traditionally forbidden boundaries of negotiations into the realm of educational policy is a crucial dimension in teacher bargaining and organization; the AFT is breaking entirely new ground. The parallel would be Walter Reuther's summoning the necessary pressure to influence the design of a GM car towards a safer model.

There are other crucial differences. One cannot easily imagine an auto worker alone or with his co-workers, engaging in direct action techniques to influence either production schedules of community sales of automobiles. Yet this auto worker's counterpart in a city classroom has the organizing techniques and the wherewithal to use them when the need arises—a fact acknowledged by Dr. Elliott Shapiro, a Harlem elementary school principal and friend of the UFT, in a recent profile of him in the *New Yorker* magazine:

> **. . . When I was asked recently, at a meeting of educators, whether I thought a teacher should first encourage the liveliness of his children or first join the UFT, I said without hesitation that he should start by joining the UFT. But so far, hardly any New York teachers realize the scope of possibilities in this direction. They don't have a full enough sense of their own strength through the grievance machinery that's been set up. Previously, if a teacher in the system had advocated, let us say, a rent strike, the principal could forbid it. And most of**

them would have forbidden it on the ground that a rent strike is not a proper activity for a teacher. If the teacher had gone ahead, he would have been guilty of insubordination or of conduct unbecoming a teacher. Now teachers *can* follow through. But the UFT must do more to make its members sufficiently aware of this breakthrough. You see, with this kind of protection, teachers could also be important in advising, participating in, and stirring up community action—about neighborhood rehabilitation, for instance, and other problems that directly concern the children as well as their parents. Think of masses of parents marching with teachers.

Many parents, children and teachers *have* marched together on a local school. True, there has been little teacher-stirred action directed towards social reform of the school neighborhood; but there has been constant agitation by teachers for reform *within their own schools*. Before Dr. Shapiro's interview was in print, New York newspapers carried these stories: one Negro chapter chairman in a Harlem elementary school, with the blessings of the parents, successfully organized a pupil boycott to thwart efforts to transfer him; one high school staff brought its case against overcrowding directly to public attention through a well rehearsed picket line with parents and pupils; an elementary school staff effectively caucused at local school board meetings for action on the problem of overcrowding (classes were being held in teacher restrooms and the principal's office) and fire hazards—to the chagrin of school principal and district superintendent, accustomed to more conventional and constricted channels of communication.

These are but a few instances, and while they may not yet exemplify the social consciousness Dr. Shapiro would exhort, they represent educational altruism blending with the art of realpolitik. Teachers find it relatively simple to take to the tactics of the street: they picket, demonstrate, form united fronts with parents and community leaders, function as their own public relations specialists, and caucus at local school board meetings with political savvy.

It has been remarked that teachers "are more verbal . . . used to dealing with governments and as a result contribute to a more political labor movement." Forgetting the implications for organized labor for the moment, this perceptive comment holds true but with one vital corrollary: in addition to the lessons learned in dealing wtih city government in a normal manner, teachers received a political education when they defied legally constituted authority by going on strike. The experience was comparable to the moment of truth of Negro college students participating in the first illegal sit-ins at lunch counters in the South; one becomes aware with a vengeance of the "power structure" and the many ways in which that "power structure" can be challenged. Once you gain the secret, power in its various manifestations becomes intelligible.

In a very real sense then, this power at the disposal of teachers is innate in their very situation. When confronted on a city-wide level this collective strength is nigh impregnable; and a teacher's union exerts its greatest pressure on the city level since the "industry" is disparate and localized rather than monolithic and national in scope. In two instances—in New York and Philadelphia—the union's threat to strike tabled indefinitely school

board proposals for involuntarily transferring experienced teachers into ghetto schools. In both instances the unions were roundly criticized by some civil rights leaders although Philadelphia has the largest Negro teaching staff of any Northern city. Civil rights pressure on this issue was not equal to the inherent strength of either the UFT or PFT. It isn't necessary to become entangled here on the forced transfer matter to draw the obvious conclusion: the focal importance of the power of a teacher's union must be readily conceded.

Just how will this power be used in future? One can reasonably hope that teachers may exercise a leverage for the greatest possible good amidst the deteriorating urban educational systems.

The schools now are to cope with a "new" poverty, qualitatively set apart from the old poverty, and buttressed by centuries of racial discrimination. This new poverty (diagnosed by Michael Harrington in *The Other America*) has transformed urban education beyond the teaching of the three R's. Education in providing the means of equality of opportunity, now turns into a struggle to attain social justice, to end the long winding spiral of racial discrimination.

What has happened in a school system like New York's in the past twenty years has little in common with the old, classic poverty. For the old poor (white immigrants), education was a means of transcending the slum. For them, there were jobs to justify the motivation to learn. With the new racial poor of today, this is no longer true. And demographic changes in a city like New York, with a relatively stable pupil population of approximately one million, suggests that the trouble with the schools has little to do with a mere rise of the masses; it is qualitative. The city has responded to the Negro and Puerto Rican influx by becoming an adjunct to the suburb; the more affluent middle class whites leave in droves. The result educationally has been that the group with the highest level of schooling has been replaced by a group with less educational attainment. And the resident whites left behind in the city are on the average below the incoming Negro and Puerto Rican migrants in educational abilities.* They are also older and their number is diminishing.

This is the all too familiar pattern of migration and exodus in our big cities. In New York City the flight continues: last year approximately 25,000 white middle class children left the city school system. The problems bequeathed by this flight are enormous. Questions are raised whether integration may be at all feasible. Yet can any education which is in fact segregated be of benefit to Negro and Puerto Rican minorities? De facto segregated elementary and secondary schools have increased rather than decreased since the 1954 Supreme Court decision, despite school pairings, bussing and school reorganization. The civil rights community is poised on the horns of a dilemma. Nowhere has this dilemma been more apparent than in the shifting of tactics and goals of a segment of the civil rights community as exemplified by Dr. Kenneth Clark. In 1954 Dr. Clark, thoroughly committed to integrated education, presented to the Supreme Court research on the deleterious effect of segregation on Negro children which was influential

**Pupils and Schools in New York City*, Elanor Bernert Sheldon and Raymond A. Glazier, Russell Sage Foundation, New York City, 1965.

in the decision condemning the "separate but equal" doctrine. A decade later, with Northern cities far from being desegregated, Dr. Clark's report for HARYOU-ACT stressed establishing good segregated schools now. Unfortunately the underlying rationale behind this approach is utopian. It hopes that should the schools be magically transformed into educational showcases the departed and departing suburban and exurban classes will return to New York, thereby reinforcing the educational quality. This is doubtful. Substandard housing alone serves as a deterrent to a return of the white middle class. In short, the urban educational crisis hinges on the conglomerate urban crisis itself. What is needed is a comprehensive assault on poverty entailing jobs, housing, improved social services, and so on.

If we could neatly divide the school crisis into the categories of *good but segregated schools* and *excellent integrated schools* and then concentrate on both avenues of approach, we would not need to worry long about the school crisis. But that is not the case. Nor can we rest our failure on the canard that the racial minorities are uneducable; that has been dispatched by educational research. The failure to educate the new urban poor stares us in the face and is a major scandal. In New York City pupils begin to drop off in achievement levels below the national average between the third and eighth grades when they are subjected to standardized testing. And pupils in slum schools fall even further behind in IQ and achievement levels than the low New York average. "The schools," Dr. Clark concludes, "are presently damaging the children they exist to help."

So far the main qualitative thrust to meet this educational failure has come from beyond the confines of the old educational order dependent on city and state coffers. It has come from the academy and the Federal government. It is the academies that have validated an insight intuitively reached by Maria Montessori fifty years ago, that children develop at least 50% of their intelligence by age four and that pre-schoolers both need and want to learn rather than develop the traits of socialability and adjustability offered by the nurseries to middle class youngsters. Through its poverty war the Federal government has opened its treasury to "headstart" the children of the poor. In putting the findings of Bloom, Moore and Bruner to work, the Federal government has cast a long shadow. What may be in store for big city schools is financial dependence on the Federal government and intellectual dependence on the academy for innovative brain power if the school crisis is to be abated. (A current example of the new importance of the academy in urban education is the UFT's consideration of calling academics into consultation to suggest educational goals in negotiating its next contract.)

Into this order is added the union teacher, as much a victim of the educational malaise as the slum child. It was as a consequence of urban demographic change that teaching as a profession declined. Back in the thirties, when jobs were scarce and before the process was in full swing, teaching possessed luster. But the challenge of the new urban poor could not be met without first reforming the conditions of teaching. Failure to do so resulted in a stasis which, while all else was rapidly being altered, created the deepest dissatisfactions among teachers. New York City teachers were underpaid and overworked but so were teachers everywhere else in America. The failure to reform teaching conditions was the prime reason

teachers suppressed their age-old jealousies and internecine rivalries along divisional, ethnic and religious lines to forge a union. The programmatic approach of the union to teacher problems assumed particular relevance in the years 1955-1960, precisely when the exodus of the white middle class from the city was at its height. Certainly a teacher had always been called upon to function as a watchdog in the lunchroom and perform similar chores. But allowing such conditions to continue and even to proliferate while other occupations were becoming increasingly professionalized—and while the schools were challenged by the new urban poor—created a situation demanding drastic action.

In November of 1960 that action was taken. Ten thousand teachers responded to the UFT's demand for a unionization election by going on strike for the first time in New York's history. The UFT, dating back to Teacher Guild and Teacher Union days, had a history of standing vigil on teacher rights and lobbying for beneficial teacher legislation.

The election that followed was a mandate for sweeping change. Of 43,500 eligible teachers over 33,000, or 77%, cast ballots—with 20,045 for the UFT, 9,770 for the NEA's hastily created Teacher's Bargaining Organization and 2,575 for the Teacher's Union (never a legitimate contender owing to its Communist past). The union pitched its campaign on the groundswell for school reform, coining the motto "UFT GETS THINGS DONE," suggesting forthcoming change. (This slogan became the rallying cry of both AFT locals and NEA affiliates in the rush of bargaining elections that came on the heels of the UFT victory.) Teachers in unionizing had done what few (including some stalwart union-minded teachers) had believed either possible or probable. And the immediate result was to provoke a measure of the change promised.

Teacher unionization, then, is inextricably connected with the government's war on a brutally new poverty and to the rise of the civil rights movement. They bear a relationship beyond simultaneity: each is a response to the underlying social malaise. What gains have been made by the union however are not as visible as the more demonstrable successes of either the government's war on poverty or the civil rights movement's legal triumphs. After five years of unionization in New York City, the schools are still in crisis. The teacher shortage is still persistant and nagging; there has been no dramatic educational rescue of the children of the urban poor.

Nevertheless the unionization of teachers has at the very least helped to slow further educational decline. The situation would certainly be much worse without the UFT. Simply in bargaining for working conditions—lowering class registers, providing teacher preparation periods, employing a central hiring system, having grievance machinery—the UFT improves the educational environment of pupils. In this far from dramatic way, teaching conditions are improved.

The UFT and other AFT locals have been preoccupied with obtaining a stable position by obtaining necessary benefits for its members. As regards the type and scope of benefits, teachers are thirty years behind their blue collar brother unionists. The National Maritime Union is now considering negotiating for free housing for its members while the UFT is implementing

its first welfare fund scheme. As the economic position of unions stabilizes, freeing them from breakthrough efforts, they will assume a more potent role in social reform.

Another result of teacher unionization is that the educational partnership between the union and the professional managerial administrators is now taken for granted in New York City; five years ago this was unthinkable. One Board of Education member, an official of the city's labor federation, tabbed the 1962 strike for a contract as nothing less than an example of "recklessness and irresponsibility;" that kind of talk is now a thing of the past.

If a greater social role be expected from the UFT, it must be pointed out that from its inception the union *has* on balance acted as an agent for both school and social reform. This role has been rooted in the traditional alliance of labor with the civil rights movement (one suspects that the theorizing of a labor civil rights coalition, like all theory, is describing an existent fact). The AFT expelled segregated locals after the 1954 Supreme Court decision while the NEA continued its de facto segregated membership. And in 1964 when a coalition group of civil rights organizations staged a school boycott protesting the lack of integration—under Reverend Milton Galamison's banner and Bayard Rustin's regimental command—the UFT stood by to protect all teachers who respected the boycott. Significantly, in the hassle over the cut in the admission of 3,000 students to City University it was the UFT, in conjunction with the United Parents Association, that mobilized the needed public support behind Chancellor Bowker to get the state funds for an expanded construction program. Similarly, as a pressure group for free tuition, the UFT displays an alliance with the civil rights movement in its broadest concepts and goals. It has been an alliance not free from strain as the conflict over forced transfer has shown. But it has been an alliance exhibiting a sense of empathy between union teachers and civil rights activists. New York teachers gave their John Dewey Medal to Martin Luther King in 1964; donated through school contributions busses for the Alabama registration drive; manned Southern Freedom schools throughout the South; maintained a drumbeat in Harlem to enroll preschoolers in the headstart program when enrollments were dangerously low the first summer.

But perhaps most significant is that the UFT in 1963 drafted its own solution to the urban school crisis. Called by the union the Effective Schools Plan (and later renamed, tautologically, the More Effective Schools Program out of deference to the sensitivities of the educational bureaucracy), it was promoted with great vigor. The plan was predicated on a drastic upheaval and remodeling of teaching and learning conditions: each school would be provided with saturated services—class registers of seminar size, remedial psychological and counselling services—combined with experimental devices such as team teaching and heterogeneous grouping according to ability (eliminating classroom segregation) along with a new democratic teacher-supervisor administration of the program. The UFT plan called for a staging of these effective schools in the subsequent years so that in ten years time all special service schools in New York (accounting for approximately one third of New York elementary and junior high schools) would be Effective schools. The Board accepted the plan in principle, a demonstra-

tion project for ten elementary schools was hastily devised the first year (1964-1965), and ten more schools were added the second year.

This plan was launched not through formalized negotiation but through "educational consultation;" in other words, through the subtle pressure of teacher power. A drawback to the MES program has proven to be its cost—approximately $218 more per pupil—measured against its modest early results. School boards and city politicians require nothing short of the dramatic, immediately and at very little cost. After the first year of rather slipshod implementation, MES pupils achieved a reading average comparable to the national average—while New York City pupils fell far below —as well as achieving a growth rate that overtook the national average. However, Board officials have been anxious to phase out the MES program in a quiet fashion, as they have other such programs as Higher Horizons. So far, only UFT pressure has maintained the program on an experimental basis.

On a national level the AFT is promoting the Effective School Plan as a blueprint, a starting point, with which to cope with the urban school crisis. Neither the AFT nor the UFT, however, feels dogmatically committed to the Effective School Plan as the panacea; it is but one more attempt to grapple with the juggernaut of urban education. But the UFT's coming up with such a plan is rife with implication. There is the precedent of a union forming educational policy, hailing the new educational partnership; there is the precedent of a solution in the urban educational crisis coming from the front lines of the educational establishment; and there is the precedent of teachers as professionals acting in a professional manner.

The UFT then has a number of vantage points from which to affect the education of the urban poor. From *within* the educational hierarchy teachers can act as partners in the running of the schools. As a pressure group within education the UFT, in concert with organizations such as the Public Education Association and the United Parents Association, acts from *outside* the educational establishment. In its contractual negotiations the union has another weapon for affecting the education of city pupils. As a liberal pressure group in alliance with the civil rights movement and as a part of organized labor in its fight to raise social and economic standards through raising minimum wage, and obtaining medical benefits such as Medicare, the UFT affects the schools.

Teachers were heard from in 1960 in New York City. Since then teachers throughout the land have asserted themselves and grown stronger in their unions. The role the UFT pursues may conceivably determine the educational future of New York City. And as New York City goes, so may the rest of the nation's cities.